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ABSTRACT

Students can improve their writing skills by studying grammar. In learning to apply a logical system in their analysis of sentence parts, for example, students develop mental discipline. This discipline can be strengthened through the grammatical analysis of their own papers. In these evaluations, which include error and stylistic analyses and a prescription for improvement, students learn to identify and correct technical errors, reduce wordiness, and sharpen and reshape sentence structures. Because traditional grammar fails to provide a working model of the English language, however, evaluations based on it tend to be error-oriented, focusing on surface features such as sentence variety rather than on the relationship between these forms and underlying meaning. Classes having worked with transformational and structural grammar, on the other hand, produce grammatical self-analysis papers that do not simply pinpoint problems, but explore their relationship to content. In studying the new grammar's surface and deep structures, students have discovered that form affects substance. (MM)

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From Fairy Dust to Mental Discipline:
A Journey Via the Grammar Text

Three years ago when I was assigned to teach traditional grammar to classes of some forty to fifty college juniors and seniors in majors as diverse as business administration and drama, I accepted, not out of conviction or a fondness for grammar exercises, but because I loved my writing courses and wanted to keep my job. With much trepidation I entered the classroom on the first day and learned the awful truth. While the course description required me to teach all the standard concepts of traditional grammar, the students fully expected to improve their writing skills. In huge classes, and without a single writing assignment on the syllabus, they wanted me to wave a magic wand and endow them with clear sentences, sharp details, distinctive writing structures.

Such a task would have been formidable, even had I believed in formal grammatical study as a route to excellence in writing. Yet all my experiences in the composition classroom had led me to the admittedly extreme view that explicit knowledge of grammatical rules and terminology and operations had no positive value for the writer and indeed often impeded the progress of beginning writers caught up in frenzied attempts to avoid initial "ands" and terminal prepositions and tense shifts and all those reprehensible comma splices, run-ons, and fragments. ("You know, the English teacher symbols," one of my students once explained, referring to the incomprehensible scrawls he had misinterpreted for years

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as signs of congenital inability to use the language of his birthright.)

I had, in fact, taught remedial students incapable of producing a coherent paragraph or shaping an idea into a sentence. . .yet perfectly able to earn 80% or better on standard diagnostic tests. (Indeed, many of the students in every remedial, developmental, or ESL class I have taught over the past ten years have been relatively proficient at spouting grammar rules--some sensible, others silly, but all garnered in the high school classroom. And at least two-thirds of these students in nearly any class I've taught have demonstrated the ability to pass objective grammar tests.) Further, I have even taught international students--particularly from the People's Republic of China--who wrote technically perfect (though admittedly formal and sometimes quaint) English prose, learned from antiquated models and outdated textbooks--students who had difficulty passing the grammar portions of standardized tests because they were confused when they encountered incorrect forms for the first time. Since they had internalized the "rules" through reading and imitation, they were uncertain how to correct the errors they would never make themselves.

Here I stood, then, firm in my conviction that grammar and writing, though not unrelated, were scarcely mutually interchangeable studies; grounded in my process approach to the teaching of composition; committed to the explanation of grammatical principles

only as problems arose in the writing or through the indirect vehicle of sentence-combining techniques; facing a grammar class with goal unknown. Yet even within the established context of the course, I was in trouble. In a single semester I had to teach the grammar I'd learned over at least a sixteen-year period to students who, although intelligent, literally could not identify "be" as a verb. These same students expected to identify gerunds or retained objects simply by looking at them and resisted learning definitions or standard "tests" for sentence parts since memorization seemed to them an unholy occupation.

But the difficulty lay much deeper than mere obstinacy. My students were illogical, unaccustomed to thinking through a problem, and impatient with the slow process of sentence analysis which would enable them to identify one sentence part in relation to another. In short, they lacked mental discipline. And so I found a secret goal, a raison d'etre for my course beyond the mere review of parts of speech. Perhaps I was not the fairy godmother my students had expected, but at least they would learn to think.

Of course, the application of logic to grammar is itself a challenging enterprise, given our society's predilection for viewing English as a language of mystery, its grammar a collection of Delphic utterances veiled in the mist of exception and contradiction. Certainly my students objected that nothing had ever been explained before and quoted teachers who had insisted, "That's English!

No one ever said it was logical." But set against a deep-rooted resentment, a conviction that English teachers simply enjoy harassing students, was an equally firm belief in correctness as both concept and goal. As Wallace W. Douglas observes, "our regimen has had at least one very conspicuous success: everybody knows about Correct English; everybody knows that their [sic] own language is, more likely than not, incorrect, but that there are some people somewhere (probably in the past) who know what correct English is and who may even use it" (College English, 44, #1 [January, 1982], 72).

Confused and illogical my students may have been, but they believed in this "Correct English" and even in its value as commodity. As one student explained her interest in my course, "A person's ability to write clear and grammatical compositions is priceless. It could possibly be the deciding factor for a raise or a promotion. On the job, bosses do not have the time to read long memos and letters. Awkward, wordy writing has no place in today's business world. The language one uses is a crucial factor in determining if someone is educated or not." And so my students were willing to go along with me, innocently confident of my ability to give them that edge in the job market, to make them EDUCATED.

As logic is the basis of a sound education, I was willing to comply. What I taught my students was not so much a system as the belief in systems of logic. That is to say, in learning

to analyze the sentence, they learned that analysis requires system, a structured approach appropriate to the discipline at hand. As the weeks went by, I persuaded my students to work from simple to complex, using the process of elimination and the application of "tests" to identify first verbs, then subjects and complements, and finally modifiers. Recognizing the same principles underlying clauses and verbal phrases as had operated in simple sentences, my students came to appreciate the patterns which--logically--invest the language with meaning.

Nevertheless, the writing problem persisted: a grammar course should, somehow, be applicable to writing. I tried assigning journals, but the workload was overwhelming, the connection to classwork unclear. I discussed usage in class, noting grammatical points which lead to stylistic problems in writing, recommending alternative structures. "Apply this to your writing," I urged, and, of course, my students nodded sagely, but I doubt if their writing improved.

Yet the solution, when it presented itself, seemed obvious enough: a grammatical self-analysis paper. Analyses could be based on writing done in the past, and I supplied detailed instructions for applying the grammatical principles covered in the course, first through a specific error analysis, to be followed by a stylistic analysis, with particular attention given to instructions on sentence-combining. A final prescriptive section enabled students

to describe the process they should undergo to improve their writing, including sample passages in original and revised format.

Students approached the novel assignment with confusion and hesitance. "The most important finding I had when analyzing my own writing," one student began, "was how difficult it was to be objective." Despite two semesters of college composition and a number of research paper assignments, many of these juniors and seniors still had little sense even of how to polish and edit. "Gaining the ability to recognize these errors in my own work has been both humbling and beneficial," another student remarked.

Yet the actual results of this assignment were amazing: out of ninety papers fewer than twenty were downright boring, at least forty were interesting, and a handful were fascinating. Most students learned to identify and correct technical errors, to reduce wordiness, to sharpen and reshape sentence structures. "Not only are most of my sentences simple rather than compound or complex," one student observed, "but I also tend to avoid using verbals, passive verbs, and prepositional phrases." (One might, of course, note the complexity of the sentence here reproduced, the result of a heightened awareness of structural alternatives.)

Another student recognized and appreciated her own use of verbal phrases: "Counting the number of gerunds and participles on each page, I decided that I favor this type of construction at the beginnings of sentences, perhaps to add some variety to

my writing." Yet she noted that her misuse of conjunctive adverbs produced comma splices and objected to her overuse of transitional devices. "It appears that each time I have difficulty uniting two ideas," she concluded, "I simply make two sentences--using 'however,' 'apparently,' 'thus,' etc. to complete the thought. While the use of verbal phrases adds to my style, this habit detracts from it."

It would seem, then, that applying their new-found logic to the solution of their own writing problems taught my students that mental discipline works more wonders than fairy dust, and me that grammar has an important role to play in liberating thinkers to write. Yet I was troubled by the limitations of my approach. My students' thinking remained error-oriented; their revisions focused upon surface features, sentence variety, and polishing. My best student's conclusion to her paper illustrates the point: "While writing the last of seven term papers this semester," she marveled, "I was aware of awkward phrases, problems with punctuation, and general technical errors, mostly because of what I learned, or relearned, in this course." Certainly a step in the right direction: but should not a grammar course do more? Can not the systematic study of grammar contribute to the complex making of meaning?

Again the solution politely presented itself as the obvious. The difficulty lay not with the approach, but rather in the content of the course itself. I had not taught traditional grammar in

any form since I had first discerned its tendency to impede the progress of students. Why is traditional grammar such a failure? Because, as any linguist knows, it does not present a working model of the English language. Students and teachers alike have concluded that English grammar is not logical, not because of the facts, but due to the failure of a system. Certainly I have taught grammar in my writing classes, but out of my own ignorance I reinvented the wheel, chiseling out bits and pieces of a system known to the more enlightened as structural and transformational grammar. Now I read the theory behind "new grammar," and I understood why a knowledge of sentence patterns helped students even in the planning stages of a paper, while definitions of the parts of speech got in the way. Certainly a thorough grounding in grammar can shape our thinking and redirect our writing even in the earliest phases of the composing process--but only a grammar which works. To get beneath the surface, I would have to teach another course.

Fortunately for my theory, our department needed another teacher for The Structure of English, a course in structural and transformational grammar. Again I confronted the magic-wand syndrome: students eager to be "educated" (in their sense), eager to write better, but loath to take up the pen. In many cases these were the same students who had just completed a study of traditional grammar, now fulfilling another requirement, expecting an easy extension to the first course, dismayed and apprehensive when I insisted,

"Forget whatever you've learned of grammar in the past." (I too was appalled at my cavalier pronouncement as I taught traditional grammar at 9:00, walked down the hall with one of my students, entered another classroom with her for my 10:00 Structure of English, and denied all I had just taught.)

Yet I was happy in this second classroom, relieved of the burden of uncertainty, sure in my goals as I asserted the logic of a system. At first I moved timidly, explaining that the content of the course would relate to the final stages of the composing process, the sculpting, polishing, editing, refining we writers do for an audience after we have shaped an idea to suit ourselves. Yet each time I taught the course I grew more bold, particularly as I came to understand that the phases of the composing process are not necessarily sequential, and as the evidence mounted that my students were deriving unexpected benefits from the course. One student, for example, stopped by my office to tell me his essay examination grades in all subjects had gone up a full letter since he had begun to concentrate on appropriate sentence patterns to convey particular types of information. Another student wondered if her grammatical analysis of one essay examination would enable her to improve on the next: "Had my self-corrections become an integral part of my writing style?" she wrote in her analytical paper. "Avoiding the use of 'that' forced me into creative sentence structure. If I thought in terms of paragraphs before beginning

to write, I easily combined as many as three sentences into one compact version with a clear linkage in meaning. Avoiding the rut of a single sentence pattern gave the appearance of a more informed analysis. I drew connections more readily."

Heartened by such testimony, I began introducing the course with a discussion of the composing process and an explanation of the value of understanding structural alternatives. I speculated on the written draft as an interface where form and meaning shape each other, bounded only by the writer's limitations of invention or lack of knowledge of the transformations available for subtle shifts of sense. Now my students began work on their grammatical self-analysis papers within the second week of classes. Each concept we discussed was to be explored in relation to the students' papers for other classes--essay tests, term projects, even newspaper articles or letters to the editor. (One member of our student newspaper staff discovered through the use of deep structure trees that his style varied markedly from feature articles to editorials.)

Certainly the task had grown no easier. One student entitled his paper "The Grammar Voyage" and began somewhat morosely, "This paper is a sort of star trek. It dares to go where no student has gone before. I usually don't like to write ordinary research papers because my knowledge of grammar is weak." Yet this same student discovered the major flaw in his writing as he explored his grammatical woes: "The sparing use of post and predeterminers

could be due to lack of planning. Waiting until the last minute, I jot down the noun with a determiner and sometimes an adjective and move on to the action. Because I concentrate on telling a story quickly, the verb gets all the attention. My noun phrases are not emphasized, and so my grammar makes me summarize. I would have to think beyond the story to use more modification. Maybe that's what my teachers mean by 'no analysis.'" Thus, even this rather weak student came at last to a clear understanding of the linkage between form and meaning.

Similarly, in analyzing a comparative essay on The Fairie Queen and Paradise Lost, another student concluded that her content had overwhelmed her form: "Although expanded, 75% of my sentences were structured as Pattern 3 [NP_1 be NP_1] sentences with little variety in the remaining 25%. This abuse seems from the task of redefining both works in order to compare them. . . . Overuse of this . . .pattern had a flattening effect throughout the paper."

Not surprisingly, most of these students, like those in the traditional grammar classes, found their papers to be simplistic. But because they had a clear sense of sentence patterns, a precise verb expansion rule, an understanding of the logic behind the English language system of modification, they were able to pinpoint the root of simplicity and relate it more clearly to content. Their analyses touched upon the dearth of adverbials (and consequent drabness of papers failing to provide information of frequency,

place, and manner), overuse of the expletive "that," feature violations, and fear of using the passive voice. Further, the students' comprehension of sentence transformation possibilities enabled them to revise and expand their papers. As one student proudly observed, "These sentences have undergone a transformation from skeletons to Arnold Schwarzeneggers."

Best of all, my students appeared to make a distinction between surface features and structures effecting meaning. "The major problem of every piece," one student concluded, "is the writer's final goal. What was she trying to accomplish? The sentences are vague and unembellished because the writer cannot focus her thoughts. Rewriting is impossible without rethinking." Stating the obvious? Perhaps. But how many students know what this one had just discovered?

And so I have come a long way from the fairy dust, and perhaps from the mental discipline as well. Oh, I still teach logic; I educate students in "correct English" and help them sharpen their thinking. But I have come full circle to teaching writing in my grammar classes, with only one paper assigned each term and a great deal of speculative analysis as class discussion proceeds. And I try to remember the words of one of my students, who taught me what my grammar course is all about: "If this exercise and self-analysis paper has taught me anything," she concluded, "it is that grammar is not the learning of boundaries and limitations, but the harnessing of possibilities."